



Plan of Alexandria shows original street grid pattern (from "A Guide to Historic Alexandria" by William Seale, originally from the Alexandria Library, Special Collections)



Goods were brought to Alexandria by ships and wagons (from "A Guide to Historic Alexandria" by William Seale, originally from William Francis Smith Collection).



Market square, 1880 (from "A Guide to Historic Alexandria" by William Seale, originally from Harper's New Monthly Magazine)

Since surveyors first laid it out in 1749, Alexandria has been a city that has struggled to provide enough open space for its residents. Because Alexandria originated as a mercantile center, where goods brought in by ship and wagon were bought and sold, it was a place that revolved around commerce. The streets of "Old Town" were laid out in a grid pattern, with every inch of land planned in a manner that would maximize economic interests, with lots intended for residences, stores, warehouses, and taverns. Because open spaces did not contribute to the burgeoning economy of the town, no parks were planned. Indeed, there was only one public place laid out in the entire community – Market Square, then facing Cameron Street – and that was for the conduct of business (Seale, 2000).

In the 253 years since its founding, Alexandria has expanded into a city that covers almost 16 square miles, and has grown to a population of more than 128,000 people. The city has one of the densest concentrations of population in the United States, with a mix of residential and commercial uses in both urban and suburban neighborhoods. While Alexandria is now an integral part of the regional economy of the Washington D.C. Metropolitan Area, the City has maintained its own distinctive heritage. Fortunately, as Alexandria has grown, so have its open spaces. The Alexandria Department of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities now owns and maintains 127 parks, ranging in size from large citywide parks such as Fort Ward Park in western Alexandria (41 acres) to small neighborhood parks like Monticello Park in the central part of the City (4.7 acres). Several of these parks, such as Founders' Park in Old Town, provide the public with access to one of Alexandria's greatest natural resources: the Potomac River. Others allow residents access to the City's sensitive stream corridors that run throughout. Still others provide opportunities for both active and passive recreational pursuits in settings that range from completely urban to more suburban neighborhood in context.

The growth of the City's open space areas, however, has not been enough to overcome the bounds of history. Because Alexandria existed and continued to expand for over 200 years before the establishment of a park system, the City has always, in essence, been playing catch up. Added to that are the pressures of a present day population that has become more diverse and has increased by over 15% between 1990 and 2000, in a city with finite boundaries and an ever-dwindling supply of potential open space areas. Moreover, Alexandrians value open space and use it both heavily and extensively. This has placed enormous pressure on the City's existing open space areas, and underlines the need both to protect the open spaces that exist as well as to create additional open space opportunities that are equitably distributed throughout Alexandria to serve all of the City's population.

The Plan presented in this report establishes a framework for addressing Alexandria's short and longer term open space needs. It looks at ways to maximize the City's limited open space opportunities by creating an open space system that builds upon and responds to the City's dense, urban context. It is clear that Alexandria has entered the new millennium facing one of

its greatest challenges, that of providing open spaces, recreation areas, and a quality way of life for a citizenry that proudly reflects the diversity of the nation itself. This Open Space Plan offers a blueprint for accomplishing that task.

### THE PLANNING PROCESS

The process that was established for developing the Open Space Plan combined the reality of assessing current conditions with the dreams and visions of what could be, and the definition of practical steps for getting there.

The process began with the establishment of an Open Space Steering Committee, comprised of representatives from those City commissions and departments with interests in open space issues, including the Parks and Recreation Commission; the Environmental Policy Commission; the Planning Commission; Office of Historic Alexandria; the Department of Recreation, Park and Cultural Activities; the Department of Planning and Zoning; the Department of Transportation and Environmental Services; the Alexandria Schools; and the Office of the City Manager. This group worked closely with the consultant team throughout the process to establish a comprehensive definition of open space, review the existing conditions inventory, help plan community outreach activities, establish the open space framework and plan, and review implementation strategies.

The assessment of existing open space areas, as well as the definition of potential open space opportunities, were carried out in several ways. The process began with the analysis of the City's existing open space data regarding parks, other open space areas, environmentally sensitive areas, streets and roads, and public and private vacant land parcels. This data was obtained through aerial photos, the City's GIS mapping system and real estate data, and additional documentation from earlier studies and discussions. In addition, the consultant team carried out a systematic inventory of all of Alexandria's existing open space areas.

All of this baseline data was further enriched through a series of outreach efforts that included: interviews with various organizations and individuals with interest in open space issues in Alexandria; three Open Space Planning District meetings, and a citywide Open Space Summit. All of these outreach efforts are described in greater detail in Chapter 4 of this report. This multi-level process of community input provided both the vision and direction for the Open Space Plan.

The Open Space Plan report is organized as follows:

- It provides an overall picture of the current open space framework, including the history of open space in Alexandria, a definition of open space, and an analysis of current open space conditions.

- It defines Alexandria's current open space needs and issues.
- It describes the results of the community outreach process.
- It presents the Open Space Plan in terms of opportunities, overall framework, goals and recommendations.
- And, finally, it addresses a strategy for plan implementation.